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ABSTRACT

A study examined the differences between the experiences and beliefs about school held by young adolescents identified as potential dropouts and those held by their more successful peers. The study was conducted at a larger, urban junior high school with an ethnic composition of 47% Orientals, 31% Whites, 16% Hispanics, 6% Blacks and .3% Native Americans. A total of 110 Junior High School students selected from 3 different achievement levels were surveyed using items drawn from the Self-Concept in School section of the Pennsylvania Quality Assessment (PQA). Included in the 110 were all 31 students identified by their counselors as at-risk. In addition, a target group of 27 students was randomly selected for intensive interviews and observations. Following completion of the survey, students were asked to write essays about their ideal futures and how they might prepare themselves for the future. It is possible to derive the following assertions from the results of the study: (1) the school experiences of at-risk and successful students are mostly a result of their perceptions of relationships with teachers; and (2) both at-risk and successful students feel responsible for their academic performance, but at-risk students are unsure how to take responsibility for their learning. (Forty-five references are included.) (PRA)

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Issues of Literacy and School Performance for At-Risk and Successful Students in a Multicultural Jr. High

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The phrase "at-risk student" has received increasing attention in light of the proliferation of research on high school dropouts. These studies illustrate that both personal factors and school connectedness interact to place some students at risk of school failure, and ultimately of dropping out. We know that students who leave high school before graduation are more likely to have backgrounds in which lower socioeconomic status and limited educational achievement are factors (Ekstron, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, 1987). In addition, they are more likely to be minority students, particularly Hispanics or Blacks (Ogbu, 1987). We also know that these are students who do not like school, and who act out their feelings through absenteeism, truancy, disruptive behavior, decreased motivation, and poor academic work (deJung & Duckworth, 1986; Ekstron, et al. 1986; Howard & Anderson, 1978; Tuck, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). Clearly, for these students, the cost of remaining in school exceeds the benefits.

The process of becoming alienated, however, does not begin in high school, nor is it experienced only by those students at-risk of dropping out. For many students, the middle grades are the deciding years (California State Department of Education, 1987; Task Force on the Education of Young Adolescents, 1989). The importance of this period to the academic lives of students lies in the developmental issues they confront: self-identity becomes a primary focus, and students' positive or negative self-esteem as learners intensifies (Beane, 1990). New definitions of ability and effort also emerge during early adolescence (Covington,1984; Nicholls, 1986; Nicholls & Miller, 1984), influencing students' levels of self-confidence and achievement

motivation (Kramer, 1978; in press). It is the contention of this paper that the middle grades are a critical, often ignored, phase of schooling in the lives of all students, and that attention to issues of literacy and school performance in these grades may provide a broader picture of the events that cause some students to leave school.

Researchers studying school transition have found that a general decline in academic motivation begins in the middle grades, and have concluded that a mismatch exists between early adolescents' developmental needs and the school environments they experience upon leaving the elementary grades (Eccles & Midgley, 1988; 1989). In fact, the transition to junior high school has been associated with a plunge in students' perceptions of the quality of school life, a plunge that does not necessarily reverse itself with time (Hirsh & Rapkin, 1987). Thus, it appears that even successful students may experience alienation to a degree (Wehlage et al.,1986), and that the middle grades are a particularly vulnerable time.

The present study was designed to examine the experiences and beliefs about school held by young adolescents identified as potential dropouts and their more successful peers. The goal of the study, to capture the insider's perspective, necessitated the use of interpretive-ethnographic methods to discover what was fundamental to the students participating in the study. These research questions guided the data collection:

1. What commonly held views about school experiences do early adolescents at-risk of failure share? In what ways do their views differ from their more successful peers?

2 What attitudes and beliefs do at-risk and successful early adolescents hold with respect to literacy and school success?

3. When is students' work engaging? What makes it so?

Method

The Research Site

The study was conducted at a large, urban jr. high school with an ethnic composition of 47% Orientals, 31% Whites, 16% Hispanics, 6% Blacks, and .3% native Americans. Primarily due to its unique population, administrators at the school cite language acquisition and communication problems, cultural differences, economic disadvantages, and social adjustments as the school's greatest challenges.

The At-Risk Program

The year the study began school counselors identified a group of 31 at-risk students using cumulative grade point averages (GPA). Students with low GPAs who were failing three or more academic courses were removed from one elective and placed in a special class referred to as Directed Study. Two Directed Study classes were organized to give students tutorial assistance in smaller, less formal classroom environments. Directed Study teachers closely supervised the overall progress of students, acting as liaisons between students and other teachers whenever possible, contacting parents, and assisting students in the development of better study habits.

In addition to the Directed Study classes, the school made several other institutional accommodations (Miller, et al., 1988) for the at-risk students. A special advisory class was organized that allowed some of the at-risk students to meet informally several times a

week to talk about social and personal problems with more successful peers and a teacher-facilitator. This idea is the hallmark of many middle schools; advisory classes are organized on a school-wide basis to address developmental needs of early adolescents (Alexander & George, 1981). Several at-risk students also were assigned as student assistants to the school counselors and attendance clerks during the first few periods of the day. It was hoped that this arrangement would facilitate closer relationships with administrative personnel, particularly guidance counselors, and act as a stimulus to get students to school on time.

Participants

The study began with a survey to measure students' perceptions of themselves as learners and their beliefs about school. A total of 110 students were selected from three different achievement levels to participate. The survey group included all 31 students who had been identified as at-risk by the counselors (GPA=1.0, S.D.=.48), and a randomly selected group of good/average (GPA=2.9, S.D.=.43), and honor students (GPA=3.8, S.D.=.16). Slightly over half (53%) of the total participants were female.

A target group of 27 students was then selected for intensive interviews and observations. Target students were randomly selected to represent a balance in achievement level, ethnic background, grade, and sex, with the exception of several at-risk students who were automatically excluded from selection due to frequent absences from school. Since absenteeism is the strongest behavioral predictor of dropping out (Bryk et al.,1989; deJung, et al., 1986), it is possible that

qualitative data collected for this group reflect its least alienated members.

Although the ethnic composition of the total participant group closely matched the overall composition of the school, differences did exist in when the ethnic compositions of the three achievement levels were compared. The vast majority of students who made the school's honor roll were Oriental, thus 89% of the honors students were Oriental. The at-risk group, however, was 32% Hispanic, 32% white, 13% black, 13% Oriental, and 10% native American. The ethnic backgrounds of the good/average students were representative of the school as a whole.

Self-reports of parental education also were collected, but did not indicate robust differences among the achievement levels. Many of the students in the honors group, as well as those in the good/average group, came from families in which one or both parents had limited education.

Procedures

The survey was administered during the third quarter of the school year. Items measuring beliefs about school were drawn from the Self-Concept in School section of the Pennsylvania Quality Assessment (PQA), an instrument developed to measure constructs relevant to school performance and attitudes. Surveys were administered orally to at-risk students during their Directed Study classes to eliminate the risk of invalid answers caused by poor reading or comprehension skills, and in large group settings to all other students. Following the completion of the survey, students were asked to write essays about their ideal futures and how they might

prepare themselves for that future. All students were assured of anonymity, and no one other than the researcher was given access to the surveys. The data obtained from this survey on beliefs about school were used to provide a broad background against which qualitative data could be compared.

Intensive interviews and observations of the target group were conducted during the third and fourth quarter of that year, and were recorded in field notes and on audio tape. Interviews with individual students lasted approximately one hour and were interspersed with informal interviews of individuals and small groups. Administrators, counselors, and the Directed Study teachers were also interviewed to obtain background on at-risk students and the at-risk program.

Other qualitative data collected included observations of at-risk students' interactions with peers, teachers, and the content of lessons, and unobtrusive measures of students' experiences derived from suspension, truancy, referral, and academic records kept by the school. Student records were examined for the total survey group, with special attention to the records of the target population. In addition, district and school documents were reviewed to gain a sense of how the school wished to be perceived.

Results of the Study

The following assertions were among those derived from the data.

1. The school experiences of at-risk and successful students are, in large measure, the result of their perceptions of relationships with teachers.

2. Like successful students, at-risk students feel responsible for their academic performance. Unlike successful students, they are unsure how to take responsibility for their learning.

Mutual respect as a Factor in Students' Levels of Self-Confidence and Achievement Motivation

Teachers are a central part of life in any school; schools could not exist without them. Thus, it is not surprising that students talk about schools in terms of the teachers with whom they interact. In this study, teachers surfaced in almost every conversation about daily events, in content-specific remarks (i.e. about English or math) students made, and as sources of identification with school when students described what they liked or what gave them trouble. The differences between at-risk students' comments and those of more successful students, however, revealed very different school worlds. For at-risk students there was considerably less oral interaction with teachers, and that which was observed or described by students was generally negative. At-risk students had fewer opportunities to speak in class or with teachers outside class, except in discipline situations, and they received oral feedback regarding their work less often.

Data from the survey supported the qualitative data collected from the target group. Specifically, items that measured students' feelings of value or worth to teachers significantly favored successful students. How did at-risk students come to believe their teachers did not understand them, would not listen to their ideas, and did not consider them worthwhile? What made significantly more at-risk students feel "put down" by their teachers? Based on the survey findings, field notes were searched for the word, *teacher*, as it was

used by successful and at-risk students, and diagrams were constructed to determine differences in the roles/qualities these groups of students ascribed to teachers.

Successful Students Beliefs about Teachers. Successful students described their teachers as having three roles: as caring or uncaring people, as instructors, and as objects of respect. As a group, successful were far more positive about teachers than were at-risk students, although perceptions within the group did vary. "The kind you can talk to" were specific teachers whose names were repeatedly mentioned, and who were differentiated from others by phrases such as, "but most teachers aren't like that."

Teachers were cast into the roles of caring or uncaring based on whether students felt teachers would listen and could be trusted. Comments such as: "One of my teachers I can talk to. She compliments you but she also corrects you." and "Ms. B. really listens. She asks you to come back and talk after class." were typical descriptions successful students applied to teachers they felt were caring, and indicated that oral interaction was a large part of that caring relationship.

Uncaring teachers, in comparison, were not necessarily thought of as disliking students, but rather as being detached from them. This distinction was clarified by a successful eighth grade female whose GPA had dropped significantly earlier in the year when a family crisis caused her to be absent from school for several weeks. Although her parents informed the school counselors, the message was not relayed to teachers and subsequently she was not allowed to make up certain work. Her grades fell. When asked why she simply didn't explain the

situation to teachers in order to make up the work, she reported, "I couldn't. I wouldn't feel comfortable telling the teachers."

Successful students frequently described teachers in the role of instructors who "warn you when you aren't doing well, and if you don't improve they get mad". Giving make-up homework to students who had been absent, correcting mistakes, and trying to make students learn were typical descriptions of what teachers did. In the minds of students, teachers' roles as instructors overlapped to a considerable degree with their ability to demonstrate caring . To most successful students, good instructors were those who cared.

The most commonly held view of teachers surfaced when students discussed the school rules. Successful students repeatedly named only two rules: respect the teacher and be prepared (i.e. study, be on time, have your materials). Respect was paired with good behavior; it was commonly believed that referrals were usually given "for goofing around and smart-mouthing the teacher", things students would do when they didn't respect the teacher. The importance of respect and its relationship to doing well is illustrated in the following excerpt from a conversation with an honors student:

> JR: I just keep doing what I'm suppose to do and I get good grades.
>
> Researcher: What are you suppose to do to get good grades?
>
> JR: Basically your work, trying it, and getting help from teachers if you don't understand. You should be courteous

and don't get into trouble. That's probably the best way to get a good grade in class.

Researcher: Being courteous is the best way?

JR: Yeah, being courteous to the teacher and your fellow students.

Researcher: Why does that help so much?

JR: If you act courteous they start thinking, ' This guy is intelligent and stuff. He knows how to act around other people.' It's the best way.

Many successful students were aware of teachers' instructional difficulties with disruptive students, and made unsolicited suggestions about ways relationships could be improved: "Teachers try, but some students won't do anything. They should have a class where the teacher will be patient with them." The use of the exact words, "respect your teacher" occurred in repeatedly in discussions with successful students, and provided an interesting perspective from which to compare the comments of at-risk students.

At-Risk Students Beliefs about Teachers. Unlike their successful peers, at-risk students saw the majority of teachers as uncaring adversaries, rarely perceiving their roles as instructors. Only the Directed Study teachers and an aide in their classroom were mentioned by students as teachers who cared. In general, students believed it was the job of these specific teachers to help them learn to do well, and as such they described them as adults who gave good advice and helped them negotiate the complex world of social relationships at the school. For example, an eighth grade male, who

had received numerous discipline referrals for defiance, compared the Directed Study aide with other teachers in the following manner:

Researcher: What do you do when you have a real problem here?

KO: See Ms. T. She helps over there in [the Directed Study class]. I just talk about things with her.

Researcher: Can you give me an example of some of her good advice?

KO: Yeah. Try to do your best no matter what the teacher says. Just don't listen to them teachers. Like don't pay any attention to them.

Researcher: What does that mean?

KO: Just do your work and don't say anything back. Like if a teacher yells at you, don't make a negative reply.

Most of the target students in this group, however, could not name a teacher they would go to for help or a teacher who would listen to them. "I usually don't think about my teachers like that," one student reported. Interestingly, even the at-risk students who were assigned to work in the office had seemingly not developed personal relationships with adults, as in the case of RK.

RK: I wouldn't go to nobody.

Researcher: Not even a counselor?

RK: No.

Researcher: That seems funny. Don't you work in the office?

RK: Yeah, but I don't *talk* to them. (student emphasis)

Without exception, when students told the researcher they had thought about dropping out of school, they also said they would not go to a counselor or teacher to talk about it.

Field notes revealed a correlation between students who could not name any teacher who cared, and those who most strongly associated teachers with adversarial roles. As adversaries, students believed teachers deliberately did not tell them about homework or give them make-up work when they were absent. They believed teacher commonly suspended students for laughing, confronted students for no reason, and told students to hurry, to work, to do better, etc. or they would fail. In only a few instances was it possible to check these descriptions for accuracy: teachers' perspectives of the incidents students described occasionally appeared in the form of referrals for defiance. The point is, however, that students believed these behaviors to be accurate descriptions of regularly occurring events.

One possible explanation for at-risk students' views of teachers as adversaries was their failure to see teachers as instructors, or to understand what that role entailed. Students, even those who said they needed to try harder, work harder, stay in school, etc., did not realize their own role in asking for clarification about homework (as opposed to the teacher not giving it) or taking responsibility for getting work missed due to absence. This, in turn, lead students to believe teachers were working against them.

"Don't talk back to the teacher" was recorded repeatedly in field notes when students were asked what they might do differently after trouble-producing situations had occurred. "He yelled. That's why I

left. I left because if I didn't leave I would have yelled right back." This same student later received a referral for leaving the classroom without permission. In discussing the referral with the researcher the following day she explained, "Don't talk back to the teacher I know, but everybody does that anyway. Maybe if the teachers would give *a little respect* (student emphasis) to the kids we wouldn't be like that."

Though teachers' beliefs about at-risk students were not investigated in this study, it was apparent from both the quantity and written content of the referrals they gave that at-risk students were poorly behaved in the classroom. The picture that emerges is one of a vicious cycle. It can hypothesized that teachers believed at-risk students lacked respect, that is, they were defiant, and acted accordingly. Students, in not understanding their own roles and responsibilities, and in feeling shut out from the oral life of the classroom, believed teachers' behaviors represented uncaring attitudes. In the end, at-risk students' feelings of being "put down" led to increased misbehavior, and misbehavior led to time spent out of class. As Berstein and Rulo (1976) have described the cycle, with academic failure comes an increase in disruptive behavior and, as subsequently more attention is paid to controlling it, less attention is paid to academic learning.

Engaging Work: Beliefs about Literacy and School Success

How students behaved within the school environment and how they interacted with teachers and peers influenced how they thought of themselves as learners, and how they came to understand the role of learning.

Numerous significant differences were found between the school self-images of at-risk students and the self-images of successful students as measured by survey items. At-risk students reported themselves less able to: *do many things well in school, pick out the right things to study, give good oral reports,* and *do homework without help.* They also had significantly lower opinions of their abilities to learn and of other students' assessments of their abilities (*I am usually one of the last to be chosen . . . .)*

What stands out in the survey data, however, are the items on which no differences were found. Three of these, *When things go wrong, it is usually someone else's fault, When I do well it is more a matter of luck . . . ,* and *If I don't do well, it is because I didn't try hard enough* indicated that at-risk students assumed as much responsibility for outcomes of their work as did successful students.

At first these data seemed to conflict with the patterns emerging in transcripts and protocols. In writing about their futures, as they were observed in the classroom, and as they described their school experiences to the researcher, at-risk students had little understanding of the tasks involved in their roles as students. Why did they assume responsibility for its outcomes?

Beliefs about Literacy. Among the at-risk students, 50% described themselves as avid readers, particularly of comics, mysteries, horror, and romance books. They readily supplied names of favorite authors and discussed the qualities of books they had read several times. "I read almost anything you give me. I don't like writing and I don't like most anything else but reading. In the morning I read, during classes I read, and after school I read. Not

textbooks. Just books. I read Stephen King and Andrew someone. He wrote Flowers in the Attic." Observations of students during Directed Study classes supported these self-reports: Students were allowed to read novels in class when they had finished work or grown frustrated with it, and many did.

Fred, a seventh grader whose teacher described him as reading below fourth grade level, discussed books about naval carriers, jets, and animals with the researcher several times over the course of the study.

> Researcher: How do you know all this about birds?
>
> FH: Cause I studied birds for three years.
>
> Researcher: You did? Where?
>
> FH: Everywhere. Wherever I could find a book. Most of it I had to learn myself. Near the [navy base] where me and my Grandma go to K-Mart I get to look at the jet planes and study them.

On one occasion he sat with the researcher and described in detail how aircraft are stored on the hanger deck when carriers are at sea. The extent of his knowledge was both amazing and exciting, but it did not seem to transfer to the classroom.

With only two exceptions, at-risk students indicated a general dislike of writing and indicated that they wrote very little in their free time or for school assignments. Successful students, by comparison, described writing as a major part of class work, and indicated that a significant portion of their free time was spent writing for pleasure. Unlike their involvement in reading, at-risk students did not believe they were good writers and did not indicate a desire to engage in

more writing. "What for? For notes like the ones girls write boys? Not me."

Written work examined attested to the extremely weak skills characteristic of the at-risk group as a whole, particularly when compared to the sophisticated writing of the more successful students. In their essays about the future, successful students answered each of the three questions posed, and usually in the order they were asked. These students used techniques such as numbering their paragraphs to correspond with the questions, or underlining significant portions of writing to indicate that they had answered the questions. At-risk students appeared to disregard the three questions and consider only the general idea of the essay. Their essays contained technical errors, partial thoughts, and sentence fragments that were not connected.

That at-risk students did not think of themselves as competent students, particularly in their use of language, was illustrated most clearly by Stephanie, a ninth grader who spent first period as an office assistant. Stephanie fielded phone calls from parents in Spanish and translated their messages into English for the attendance secretary, yet Stephanie believed she had no language skills: "I really can't do anything well, not really."

Learning as Preparation for the Future . Probed for their beliefs on what they could do to improve their grades, at-risk students typically responded with, "I have to work on English and science,"etc., or "I want to do better. I need to study more." It was apparent that these students took responsibility for the outcomes of their own work, or lack of it, and evidence indicated that one reason for this was their

identification for the Directed Study class. They knew and spoke freely about the reason they were placed in the class, usually in the positive terms of going "where people helped you", and were well aware of their academic problems. In every case they reported their grades accurately to the researcher when asked: What kind of a student would you say you are? Within the Directed Study class, itself, teachers were observed verbally stressing students' responsibilities, particularly as they pertained to completing assignments. The only evidence found that at-risk students attributed responsibility for their progress to a source other than themselves was in the survey item, *Getting good grades depends more on how teachers feel about me than on how well I work.* Even in this instance, however, it was not the teachers who were held responsible so much as it was the feelings at-risk students perceived teachers had about them as people.

In essays, successful students tended to cite the need for support from family and friends, and to list personal development goals as a part of their future: "I would learn to be proud of whom I am and where I stand." At- risk students made no such connections, and in only a few cases, mentioned school or education at all. While this may be partially explained by their limited writing skills, interviews with at-risk students about preparation for daily school events, as well as preparation for the futures they wanted, produced the same results. At-risk students were unable to articulate the specific skills or tasks that were components in "doing better work".

Discussion

Lipsitz (1984), in a case study of middle schools, has argued that positive faculty attitudes and teaching practices that maximize

participation are the hallmarks of effective middle grade schools. Her findings overlap with the suggestions of other researchers who have investigated reasons students become alienated and eventually disengage from school completely. So important are these school context factors that some researchers have suggested alternative schools for at-risk students as a means of constructing more humanistic environments for those who seem least able to feel value and a sense of belonging within the regular school (Gold & Mann,1984)

In this descriptive investigation of at-risk students' school lives, complex respect relationships between students and teachers, and students' perceptions of learning as preparation for the future surfaced as factors negatively affecting performance. These factors were commonly felt by students; that is, they cut across the personality variations within the at-risk group, and revealed the significantly different school lives of at-risk students when compared to successful students in the same school.

These findings suggest that middle grade schools should provide teachers and students with training in communication strategies that demonstrate respect, and with organizational components that foster the growth of respect. As schools grow increasing larger and as time is increasingly absorbed by the more in-depth curriculum of secondary schools, human relationships become strained. Successful students, who may also feel alienated, appear to have the social skills that enable them to interact more effectively in larger environments. At-risk students feel threatened, perceive teachers as adversaries, and act on their feelings of alienation in unacceptable ways.

In this study misbehavior led to a focus on correction as opposed to a focus on learning, and at-risk students became further removed from the skills needed to improve their academic standing. Schools that provide smaller environments and greater integration through structures such as teaming may positively affect the respect relationships between students and teachers. Team organizations may also assist teachers who have became detached from students and are unable to demonstrate the caring behaviors important to both successful and at-risk students through the support provided by other members.

This study suggests that more respectful student-teacher relationships could influence the abilities of at-risk students to perceive the connection between school as preparation and the futures they desired. Teachers and school self-image were found to be centrally involved in how students came to value and belong in school; that is, how they identified with school. In this study, junior high school was not seen as an important by at-risk students because they did not perceive the relationship between school and the future, and because they had no tangible evidence of progress such as course credits. Given the academic foundation these students did not develop in jr. high, the power of the following at-risk student's mistaken insight can be seen.

> DM: Tell them (new students) not to worry. Like we're going to high school and all this will happen again. Junior high is a warm up for the future.

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